

Stalin, Joseph

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Joseph Stalin became the preeminent Soviet leader after the death of Vladimir I. LENIN in 1924. From 1929 until his own death in 1953, Stalin held absolute authority. Outwardly modest and unassuming and intellectually unimpressive, he applied a shrewd, practical intelligence to political organization and manipulation. Because he rarely appeared to be what he was, Stalin was consistently underestimated by his opponents, who usually became his victims. He brought his country to world power status but imposed upon it one of the most ruthless regimes in history.

Early Life and Career

Stalin was born Joseph Vissarionovich Djughashvili on Dec. 21 (N.S.), 1879, in the Georgian hill town of Gori. His father, a poor, unsuccessful shoemaker, was an alcoholic who beat his son unmercifully and who died in a brawl when the boy was 11 years old. Stalin's mother, Ekaterina, was a washerwoman, hopeful that her sole surviving child would be a priest. According to Robert Tucker, a recent biographer, her attentiveness encouraged Stalin toward self-idealization, while the deprivations of his childhood may have made a compensatory fantasy life psychologically indispensable. In any event, young Stalin was given to identifying with hero-figures. His early nickname, Koba, was that of a fictional mountain bandit and rebel; if his family's squalor gave him ambition and an acute class consciousness, his Georgian background also taught him brutality and vengeance.

At the age of 14, Stalin entered the Tiflis Theological Seminary. By his own testimony, the discipline there was another impetus toward revolutionary activism. In 1898 he became involved in radical political activity. The next year he left the seminary without graduating and became a full-time revolutionary organizer. A member of the Georgian branch of the Social Democratic party by 1901, Stalin roamed the Caucasus, agitating among workers, helping with strikes, and spreading socialist literature. He had no oratorical skills or charisma but showed great talent at practical organizational activity. His dull, pockmarked appearance also concealed a genuine intelligence and a particularly acute memory.

When the Social Democrats split (1903) into two groups, the BOLSHEVIKS AND MENSHEVIKS, Stalin supported the more radical Bolsheviks and their leader, V. I. Lenin. Lenin appreciated Stalin's familiarity with Russian nationality problems and his intense personal loyalty. Between 1902 and 1913, Stalin was arrested many times but escaped repeatedly to continue working as a Bolshevik organizer. During these years he also staged robberies to obtain funds for the Bolsheviks.

The Road to Absolute Power

In 1912, Lenin rewarded Stalin by naming him to the Bolshevik Central Committee. From there, Stalin rapidly gained influence and power among the Bolsheviks and served as the first editor of Pravda, the party newspaper. He also began to use the name Stalin, meaning "man of steel." Exiled (1913-17) to Siberia by the tsarist government, he returned after the March Revolution had overthrown the monarchy (see RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONS OF 1917). Stalin played an important organizational role in the party after the first unsuccessful Bolshevik attempt to seize power (the "July days") when the Bolshevik Leon TROTSKY was arrested and Lenin was forced into hiding. Following the successful November Revolution, Stalin was appointed to seemingly mundane administrative posts such as commissar of nationalities (1917-23) and commissar of workers' and peasants' inspection (1919-23), but in 1922, without fanfare, Stalin became general secretary of the party's Central Committee.

He now controlled appointments, set agendas, and could transfer thousands of party officials from post to post at will. He was also nourishing a hatred of intellectuals, a disdain for educated "specialists," and an insatiable thirst for power.

After Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin used his control of the party apparatus to crush his opponents. For his de-emphasis on world revolution under the slogan "socialism in one country" and his moderate economic policies, the general secretary was attacked by Trotsky, who was belatedly joined by Lev KAMENEV and Grigory ZINOVIEV. By 1928, Stalin had driven this leftist opposition from its party posts. Then, whether for political or economic reasons, he adopted such leftist programs as agricultural collectivization and rapid industrialization and smashed the party's right, which was led by Nikolai BUKHARIN, for opposing measures that he himself had recently attacked. By the end of 1929, Stalin was the undisputed master of the USSR.

Collectivization and Industrialization

Stalin's program of farm collectivization began late in 1928 when he suddenly ordered the expropriation of the lands of the middle-class farmers, or KULAKS. The party managed to seize total control of the harvest, deport about 5 million kulaks as "bourgeois residue" from the countryside, and secure enough capital (through the export of the forcibly seized grain) to finance a massive industrialization drive. Brutally suppressing peasant resistance, Stalin refused to slacken the pace despite a famine in 1932 and mounting opposition within his own party. Disaffection with Stalin was manifest at the 17th Party Congress in January-February 1934, when Leningrad party leader Sergei Kirov, a favorite of moderate delegates, received an ovation equal to Stalin's. Peasant resistance was quashed, however, and collectivization proved a success in terms of facilitating rapid industrial growth. Soviet industrialization was achieved by means of three 5-year plans, lasting from 1928 until World War II interrupted the last one in 1941.

The Great Purges

Having mastered the economic front, Stalin felt free to turn on all those who appeared to have doubted his wisdom and ability. In December 1934, Kirov was assassinated, probably at the behest of Stalin, who used the murder as the pretext for arresting—within the year—virtually all major party figures as saboteurs. From 1936 to 1938 he staged the Moscow show trials, at which prominent old Bolsheviks and army officers were convicted of implausibly monstrous crimes. By 1937, Stalin's blood purge extended through every party cell in the country. By 1939 a total of 98 of the 139 central committee members elected in 1934 had been shot and 1,108 of the 1,966 delegates to the 17th Congress arrested. The secret-police reign of terror annihilated a large portion of every profession and reached down into the general population. Deaths have been estimated in the millions, including those who perished in concentration camps. At the same time, Stalin began promoting a cult of adulation that proclaimed him a genius in every field of human endeavor. By the time the terror eased in 1938, Stalin's dictatorship had become entirely personal, unrestrained by the party or any other institution.

World War II Leadership

In world affairs, Stalin began to fear the growing power of Nazi Germany. After abortive attempts to reach an accord with the Western democracies, he concluded (1939) a nonaggression treaty (see NAZI-SOVIET PACT) with Hitler. After Germany invaded Poland at the start of World War II, Stalin acted to expand Soviet influence in Europe by occupying eastern Poland and attacking Finland (see RUSSO-FINNISH WAR). The nonaggression pact with Germany, however, proved short-lived when German troops invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941.

Taking personal control of the armed forces, Stalin expended troops as easily as he had executed kulaks, but the USSR's industrial plant produced enormous quantities of sophisticated armament and weaponry. Much more so than the other principal Allied leaders, U.S. president Franklin D. ROOSEVELT or British prime minister Winston CHURCHILL, Stalin also commanded his army directly on a day-to-day basis, impressing foreign observers tremendously with his grasp of detail. He proved a skillful negotiator at the major Allied conferences (see TEHRAN CONFERENCE; YALTA CONFERENCE; POTSDAM CONFERENCE).

Last Years

In 1945, Stalin was at the height of his power and prestige, regarded as his country's savior by millions of his subjects. The period between 1945 and his death in 1953, however, saw a new wave of repression and some of Stalin's worst excesses. Returned prisoners of war were incarcerated in concentration camps. New duties on peasants reduced many to the status of serfs, and his imposition of Communist regimes on Eastern European nations helped create the perilous climate of the COLD WAR. Stalin now turned on many of his closest associates. In early 1953 he announced that he had uncovered a plot among the Kremlin's corps of doctors; new arrests seemed imminent, and many feared another great purge. Stalin suddenly died, however, on Mar. 5, 1953.

Stalin's reputation declined in the USSR after Nikita KHRUSHCHEV revealed many of Stalin's crimes in 1956. In the post-Khrushchev period, however, notably that of Leonid BREZHNEV, anti-Stalinist rhetoric was downplayed. In China and part of the Third World he was often regarded as a strong revolutionary leader who modernized his nation's economy.

In the early years of the Gorbachev period, official opinion on Stalin vacillated between praise and criticism. But in the atmosphere of GLASNOST (a policy of encouragement of candor and openness), artists, intellectuals, and even political figures began to speak openly of the horrors of the Stalin years. Repentance, a 1986 film thinly

disguised as fiction, concerned a dictator who was a composite of Stalin and Lavrenti BERIA, the Soviet KGB chief. In a major speech in November 1987, Gorbachev, addressing 6,000 Communist party officials and others, said that Stalin had been guilty of "enormous and unforgivable" crimes that were a "lesson for all generations." In February 1988, the Soviet government rehabilitated the reputation of Nikolai Bukharin and 19 others purged by Stalin, and in May the government officially announced a posthumous rehabilitation of Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, Karl Radek, and others who had been executed. In Nedelya, a weekly supplement to the Soviet government newspaper Izvestia, an April 1988 article declared that Stalin's policy of forced collectivization between 1929 and 1933 had cost 25 million lives. Pravda, the Soviet Communist party newspaper, reported in January 1989 that 25,000 victims of Stalin's purges had been posthumously rehabilitated. TASS, the Soviet news agency, reported in March that a huge mass grave near the city of Kiev contained the remains of as many as 300,000 people, killed in the 1930s under Stalin. With the breakup of the USSR and the opening up of the Soviet archives and KGB files in the 1990s, a wealth of new material has become available that will enable historians to piece together a more complete picture of the Soviet leader.

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